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SUBJECT: GOAM USES NEW NRM FOR LABOR TRAFFICKING CASE

REF: YEREVAN 244

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) On March 17, Armenian police reported their launching of an investigation into a major labor trafficking case involving the forced labor of Armenian men in Russia. According to police, three suspected traffickers recruited and transferred eight male victims to a remote village in Russia's Altay Kray region, where they exploited them for unremunerated labor in the construction field. According to a prominent, local anti-trafficking NGO, Armenia's police invoked the new National Referral Mechanism (NRM) in their handling of the case, using it effectively to identify and refer the victims for shelter and assistance. This use of the new NRM by the police heralds progress in Armenia's anti-trafficking efforts, with law enforcement bodies now actively involved in the provision of victim assistance in a more institutionalized and formal manner.
END SUMMARY.

TRAFFICKING - A FAMILY BUSINESS

¶2. (SBU) On March 17, Armenian police reported that they they had detained the day before at Yerevan's international airport two Russian citizens (Volodya M. and Simak M.), and alleged that in April 2008 these individuals had recruited and transferred to the Zalesovo village in Russia's Altay Kray region eight male Armenian trafficking victims between the ages of 23-59, whom they then exploited for uncompensated labor in the construction field. Police arrested Volodya M., but released his son, Simak M., after he signed an oath not to depart Armenia. A few days later police apprehended a third suspect, Sevak M., another son of Volodya M., and also a Russian citizen. He was released, pending his oath not to depart Armenia. According to police the degree of involvement of the sons remains unclear, and the investigation is ongoing. (NOTE: This is the second investigation of a recent labor trafficking case involving a large group of Armenian males being trafficked to Russia for forced or uncompensated labor (reftel) END NOTE).

NRM IN PLACE AND RUNNING

¶3. (SBU) According to the local anti-trafficking NGO Hope and Help, the police attentively followed the protocol of Armenia's recently implemented NRM to assist trafficking victims. In the police's referral of the victims to Hope and Help, they properly identified the victims as being trafficked, and then officially referred them with a formal letter request for further assistance. (COMMENT: The police's response in this case represented a departure from past practice, when they would either not act on a case, or merely phone an NGO and request it to shelter the victims. This change marks an encouraging sign of the NRM's implementation, and the formalization

of law enforcement-NGO cooperation on trafficking cases, as foreseen by the NRM. END NOTE.) All of the victims in the labor trafficking case have filed civil complaints against the traffickers indicating the sums of money owed to them (ranging from USD 4,000 - 6,000).

VILLAGE POPULATION AT RISK

14. (SBU) According to Hope and Help, all of the victims in the trafficking case hail from impoverished villages located near the town of Gavar in the Gegharkunik region. Gavar is one of Armenia's poorest communities. While Russian citizens, all three suspected traffickers are ethnic Armenians with roots in Gavar's neighboring villages. According to the trafficking victims, they were exploited in various construction projects for six months, at which time their traffickers abruptly returned them to Armenia without paying them their owed wages. While in Russia they lived in semi-completed housing, were underfed, saw their passports confiscated, and were not registered for residency by their traffickers, which made them illegal aliens. The victims filed complaints with Armenian police upon their return to Yerevan, after which the police launched the investigation and referred them to Hope and Help for assistance.

COMMENT

15. (SBU) It is encouraging that law enforcement bodies appear to have taken the NRM on board, are using it as it was intended, and promoting new institutionalized cooperation with NGOs in the process. The sobering side of this, of course, is that with

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Armenia's worsening economic situation, its poorest citizens will be more vulnerable to predatory trafficking. This bears watching in the near future, as many of Armenia's itinerant labor force will no longer be able to find paid seasonal jobs in Russia. This large pool of inactive labor could become exploitable prey for traffickers.

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